

Star educate



Captains of knowledge

Read the stories of these extraordinary women who not only made great inroads in their respective fields but have also broken barriers to helm four of the nation's top public universities. >2 & 3

Cover story

Stamping their mark as varsity V-Cs

The four female vice-chancellors at the public universities are highly qualified and have made an impact in their areas of expertise.

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FOUR women have taken on the coveted vice-chancellor role in four out of the 20 public universities in Malaysia.

A search committee comprising the who's who in higher education is tasked with the search for the next vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor to fill the vacancies in a public university.

Higher Education Ministry director-general Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir said at least four candidates are carefully considered before any decision is made on the next vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor.

The four — Prof Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris from Universiti Putra Malaysia, Prof Datuk Seri Zaleha Kamaruddin from International Islamic University Malaysia, Prof Datuk Dr Asma Ismail from Universiti Sains Malaysia and Prof Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu were appointed as they fit the bill.

"All are highly qualified with scholarly experience and have made names in their areas of

WOW

Women do Wonders

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Organiser **Star** MEDIA GROUP Main sponsor **AirAsia**

expertise," she told *StarEducate*.

Dr Siti Hamisah said women play an important part in the education system.

Three female trailblazers also made an impact when they were appointed to their roles in the 2000s.

Datuk Rafiah Salim made history when she was the first woman picked to head a public university. She was appointed vice-chancellor of Universiti Malaya in 2006.

Prof Tan Sri Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin was subsequently appointed as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia vice-chancellor several months later in the same year.

Prof Datuk Dr Aminah Ayob was appointed vice-chancellor of



Dr Siti Hamisah says the four female vice-chancellors were appointed as they fit the bill.

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in 2007.

As part of the Star Media Group's month-long celebration of women in conjunction with International Women's Day on March 8, here are four women speaking about heading the country's public universities.

AirAsia is Star Media Group's partner for WOW, a month-long celebration of women held in conjunction with International Women's Day.

A source of inspiration and mentor

PHYSICS buff Prof Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar is also the first woman vice-chancellor at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT). She took up the position in April 2015.

The mother of six adult children, said she is proud of the fact that she is the first female vice-chancellor in the east coast of peninsular Malaysia.

She obtained her Bachelor of Science degree majoring in Physics from the State University of New York in the United States and returned to Malaysia for her PhD in Physics-Laser Technology from Universiti Teknologi (UTM).

She was a professor in UTM but has also explored other opportunities beyond academia.

She was seconded for six years at the National Oceanographic Directorate at the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry as a director/undersecretary for national research coordinator and was also the national focal point for the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of Unesco and Coral Triangle Initiative on coral reefs, fisheries and food.

At UMT, she said 60% of the 475 academics there are females.

"I have a good relationship with all staff and they respect me as a leader.

"Some of the women staff have expressed that they see me as their source of inspiration and mentor."

Her days at the office are rarely



Prof Nor Aieni has explored other opportunities beyond academia.

spent actually being in her office.

She normally starts her day by reviewing her daily and weekly schedules, planning big events and important appointments. She also reviews briefing notes, documents, opening speeches, presentations and papers with her secretary, special assistants and staff.

Prof Nor Aieni starts moving around campus to attend her many meetings with staff, students and special guests.

"Most days I give speeches at official functions, present keynote addresses in seminars and conferences within UMT or other universities locally or overseas," she said.

PROF Datin Paduka Dr Aini Ideris never imagined that she would one day head her former alma mater, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

She obtained her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) in 1979 when UPM was known as Universiti Pertanian Malaysia. She became the university's first female vice-chancellor on New Year's Day in 2016.

She has been actively involved in research, related to the control of poultry diseases and development of poultry vaccines, and has commercialised two poultry vaccines that are now sold in more than 10 countries.

She gamely took on the role of vice-chancellor when she was informed of her new post despite not knowing what was in store.

"My philosophy since I was young is to never say 'no' to any challenge that is given to me. Even if I don't know how to do something.

"I will first accept the challenge and figure it out along the way," she said.

If she doesn't know something or isn't sure, Prof Aini makes it a point to consult others and get their take on things.

"I always love to engage and interact with people in order to learn, guide, encourage or motivate them to get things moving with perfection."

A typical day at the office involves attending to numerous appointments, multitudes of meetings with staff and various ministries, writing reports and attending to guests both local and international, from other universities,

Poultry expert takes on challenges



Prof Aini is actively involved in research related to the control of poultry diseases and developing vaccines.

industries and government agencies.

Besides her heavy administrative workload, Prof Aini is involved in giving lectures, conducting practical classes and providing clinical training to undergraduate and postgraduate students in the DVM.

She has supervised the final year projects of more than 30 DVM students, graduated more than 30 Master students, and 20 PhD students.

Her current batch of postgraduate students are researching avian respiratory and immunosuppressive diseases.

Prof Aini said she has a keen interest in birds and poultry because they are important to the human race - both as food and as pets.

Not only is she kept busy at the university, she also attends to clinical cases in UPM's Veterinary Teaching Hospital and farms.

Her day starts early but never ends early.

Prof Aini said she only leaves the office at 8pm, that is, if she doesn't have a dinner function to attend that night.

Women play a big part in academia, she said, adding that 51.72%



Prof Aini posing with UPM students and Olympic 2016 athletes Zaidatul Husniah Zulkifli (left) and Jonathan Wong Guanjie (right).

of her academic staff are female. At work, Prof Aini also acts as a mentor. However, she does not discriminate, whether they are men or women.

"Both men and women should

be able to work together on equal capabilities, complementing each other."

Being a woman in the workforce does not come without its challenges.



Sixty percent of the academics are female at UMT.

There are days when she doesn't even have time to have lunch as the meetings and appointments never seem to end.

Prof Nor Aieni added that if she is lucky, she can squeeze in a quick swim to unwind before continuing with events at night and finishing all her paperwork.

Even her weekends are packed with meetings and conferences, it's a wonder she can find any time to spend with her family.

"Obviously, expectations are very high for the different roles of being a mother, grandmother and wife on top of being a vice-chancellor," she said.

She can "be quite adaptable" at switching between those roles thanks to proper time and expectation management.

Prof Nor Aieni said she is blessed to be given an important role in one of Malaysia's public universities and to be able to spearhead tertiary education in the country.

"We aim to enhance governance, develop our talent, achieve academic excellence, carry out students development (including infra-structure support), strengthen research, innovation, knowledge transfer and internationalisation and income generation," she said on her plans for UMT.



Prof Nor Aieni (third from right) representing UMT at the 14th Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition 2017 with her colleagues.

A passion for developing innovative healthcare

MALAYSIA'S Apex university welcomed its first female vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Asma Ismail last October.

Prof Asma who is Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) vice-chancellor, felt honoured the day she was notified of her new post at the "University In A Garden."

However, this is not Prof Asma's first vice-chancellor posting as she also headed Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia.

Prof Asma is a woman of many "firsts". She was also the first woman director-general of the Higher Education Ministry.

A high-achiever by nature, Prof Asma said she has been a straight As student since Year One.

"However, one thing that I remembered really well was when my family moved from Jitra to Penang. I got a place in Residency Road Girls' School, a top girls' school in Penang.

"We had classes from Standard 3 A to I and I was placed in the last class, 3I!"

This, she says, shocked her and left her unmotivated at first but not for long.

She soon worked her way back to the top and was made head girl in Year Six.

After being accepted into the famous St. George's Girl's School in Penang, she said she faced another

hurdle. One that she did not expect.

"You could not apply to attend a residential school in the past as you had to be invited according to your academic excellence and potential.

"I realised that early and strived to be a better student. All the hard-work paid off when I was offered a place at the prestigious Tengku Kurshiah College (TKC), one of the best schools in Malaysia."

"It was here that I learnt to see my true potential. To reach for the sky and aim to be the best that you can be."

The biology enthusiast then pursued her degree in the subject in the University of Nevada, Reno, in the United States.

She also obtained her PhD in the field of Cellular and Molecular Biology from the same university.

Prof Asma is a specialist in proteomics (large scale study of proteins) and its application in the rapid diagnosis of infectious diseases, especially typhoid fever.

Her passion lies in developing innovative healthcare with Malaysia's rich resources and generating income for the country.

She added that none of her research and work would mean anything if there was no improvement in society's quality of life.

Her discoveries which have been

translated into four rapid diagnostic kits for typhoid, are now successfully commercialised in more than 18 countries since 1994.

"Commercialisation of TYPHIDOT, a rapid diagnostic test to diagnose for acute typhoid, has generated sales, publications, created more than 500 jobs worldwide and supported the local industries in Malaysia," she added.

Prof Asma said the commercialisation of the diagnostic kits led to the creation of a biotech startup pioneering in biondiagnostics for the country.

"In retrospect, the ability to embrace challenges have made me a stronger person that does not give up easily," she said.

"Whatever challenge that's coming your way, embrace it, face it head on and rise above it."

Prof Asma's discoveries have been translated into four rapid diagnostic kits for typhoid.



Cover story



Prof Zaleha says women make up more than half of the academic workforce at IIUM.

Lawyer turned academic

PROF Datuk Seri Zaleha Kamaruddin became the first female rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in August 2011.

She has been interested in law since she was young and obtained her Bachelor of Law from Universiti Malaya in 1985.

She then completed a Master's degree in Comparative Laws and Advanced Diploma in Syariah Law and Practice in IIUM. This was followed by a PhD in Comparative Laws at University College London.

Her career as an academic began after she was admitted as an advocate and solicitor of the High Court of Malaya in 1986.

She then returned to IIUM and worked her way up the ladder serving in various capacities over the last 30 years.

"Before I was appointed as rector, I was the Dean of the Ahmad Ibrahim Faculty of Laws and Dean of the Centre for Postgraduate Studies," she said.

Prof Zaleha said women make up more than half of the academic workforce at IIUM with 1,029 or 53% being female as of February this year.

"IIUM is now a workplace of choice for thousands of academic, administrative and technical staff. Our staff hail from over 40 countries, with a turnover rate below 2.5%.

"We are not only a team, we are a family, calling ourselves the IIUMyFamily," she added.

A typical day as a vice-chancellor involves discussions on the ground, and a good deal of strategising to achieve the vision and mission of the university, she said.

"Our main priority is our vision and mission which we base on one foundation - Islamisation.

"To achieve this we focus on key result areas such as teaching; learning, research; innovation, holistic student development, internationalisation, financial sustainability and talent management.

"The transformation of the university is our devotion to move forward in line with the national educational aspirations and the needs of the Muslim ummah," she added.